

Shichiken Brewery

Yamanashi's abundance of pristine water makes it a prime location for breweries and major drink manufacturers. Among these is Shichiken (Seven Sages), one of the oldest sake breweries in Yamanashi Prefecture. Shichiken is a family business, owned and operated by generation upon generation of the Kitahara family since its founding in 1750.

With centuries of brewing expertise, Shichiken sake has won numerous first-prize awards in various sake competitions. The company's sake is held in high regard across Japan.

Shichiken Origins

The company was founded in 1750 by Kitahara Nakaya Ihei, an experienced sake brewer from the Takato domain (in Shinshu, present-day Nagano Prefecture). He often traveled to Edo from Takato, and one night he stayed in Yamanashi. He tasted the local water and was convinced that it had a purity like no other in the country. Later, he began brewing sake in the Koshu area.

In 1835, fifth-generation master brewer Kitahara Ihei received a gift from Naito Yoriyasu, daimyo of the Takato domain: a pair of hand-crafted fanlight window frames with a portrait of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove. As legend has it, these sages were learned men who drank wine and wrote poetry to help escape political tensions during the Three Kingdoms period in China (third century CE). Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove is 'Chikurin no Shichiken' in Japanese—the origin of the brewery's name.

Tradition of Innovation

In Japan, the alcohol industry is increasingly competitive. With beer, wine, and numerous spirits and liqueurs to choose from, consumers have far more choice than they did back in 1750. To stay ahead of the market, Shichiken must constantly adopt new brewing methods and innovate in their brewing practices.

Fortunately, their efforts paid off in 2017 when the company won first prize in a sake competition in Tokyo. Shichiken sake is held in high regard.

Purity of Yamanashi Water

The current 13th generation CEO is Kitahara Tsushima and the current brewmaster is Kitahara Ryogo. They will never divulge the details of Shichiken's brewing methods. Kitahara Tsushima did admit, however, that the most important ingredient of Shichiken sake is the water.

Much of Yamanashi's water is so pure that people can drink it straight from certain rivers and streams. "When you talk about wine making," says Kitahara, "the best place to make wine is the place with the best grapes. However, with sake, the ratio of rice to water is roughly 20 percent rice to 80 percent water. Therefore, the best place to make sake is not the place with the best rice, but rather the place with the purest water."

Water is an important resource and symbol in Yamanashi history and religious mythology, and that significance continues today.

Shichiken Tour and Sake Tasting

Visitors to Shichiken can take a tour of the brewing facilities and museum. Please make a reservation for the tour. During operating hours, visitors can participate in a sake tasting for a small fee. A gift shop sells Shichiken sake and other items made by the company.